

Sacred spaces of Karen refugees and humanitarian aid across the Thailand-Burma border

Horstmann, Alexander

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Horstmann, A. (2011). Sacred spaces of Karen refugees and humanitarian aid across the Thailand-Burma border. *ASEAS - Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 4(2), 254-272. <https://doi.org/10.4232/10.ASEAS-4.2-4>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivatives). For more information see:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

Sacred Spaces of Karen Refugees and Humanitarian Aid Across the Thailand-Burma Border

ALEXANDER HORSTMANN¹

Mahidol University, Thailand & Max Planck Institute for the Study of Ethnic and Religious Diversity, Germany

Citation Horstmann, A. (2011). Sacred Spaces of Karen Refugees and Humanitarian Aid Across the Thailand-Burma Border. ASEAS – Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies, 4(2), 254-272.

In this article, I demonstrate that the Karen National Union (KNU) was able to manipulate and politicise humanitarian aid in the Thailand-Burma borderland. I contend that in the context of the civil war in eastern Burma, Protestant Christianity provides a crucial vehicle for political mobilisation. The article shows that refugee camps in the Thai borderland become centres of proselytisation, and that Protestant evangelical and missionary networks open up passages across the Thai-Burmese border. The article thus considers a case where a homeland is constructed in the liminal space between two nations. Illegal emergency aid that doubles as missionary project reinforces the image of a helpless victim being vandalized by evil Burmese army.

Keywords: Karen; Nationalism; Civil War; Refugees; Humanitarian Aid

Dieser Artikel zeigt auf, wie es der Karen National Union (KNU) gelungen ist, die humanitäre Hilfe im Grenzgebiet zwischen Thailand und Burma für eigene Ziele zu manipulieren und zu politisieren. Ich argumentiere, dass das protestantische Christentum ein entscheidendes Vehikel zur politischen Mobilisierung im Kontext des Bürgerkriegs in Ost-Burma darstellt. Der Artikel zeigt, dass die Flüchtlingslager im thailändischen Grenzgebiet als Zentren der Missionierung dienen und dass die protestantisch-evangelikalen und missionarischen Netzwerke territoriale Korridore durch die thailändisch-burmesische Grenze öffnen. Wir sehen hier ein Fallbeispiel, wie eine imaginierte Nation in der Grenzerfahrung zweier Nationen konstruiert wird. Soforthilfe, die mit protestantischer Mission doppelt, verstärkt das Bild hilfloser Opfer, die von der burmesischen Armee vandalisiert werden.

Keywords: Karen; Nationalismus; Bürgerkrieg; Flüchtlinge; Humanitäre Hilfe



1 Alexander Horstmann is Visiting Professor at Mahidol University in Salaya, Thailand, and Senior Research Partner at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Goettingen, Germany. Contact: cralexander@mahidol.ac.th

Introduction²

In November 2010, I assisted in a meeting in which Karen pastors and intellectuals from Thailand and Burma as well as other Karen came together in a Bible School in Chiang Mai in order to read the Bible in a special way, 'through Karen eyes'. Over two days, this circle tried to make sense of their 'fate' and to find ways to explain and to overcome the suffering of the Karen population in eastern Burma. The meeting also involved political discussions on the future of the Karen state. Some Christian intellectuals in attendance served as mediators aiming to negotiate a ceasefire and peace between the Karen National Union (KNU), the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), and the Burmese government. They questioned whether violence on the Karen's side was a way to peace. Until now, the KNU sticks to armed struggle and the mantra of never surrendering, although negotiations with representatives of the Burmese government for a ceasefire are underway. Other leaders regard the conflict as a spiritual warfare and see themselves as spiritual leaders and staunch nationalists.³

Although debating in a context of a Federal Union of Burma solution, the national narrative of a unified Karen ethnic group remains stronger than ever. In this article, I argue that the Karen example provides a case where a nation is constructed, imagined, and contested in the context of displacement and political exile in the margin of two nations (Dudley, 2007). While the physical space of a Karen homeland, the *Kawthoolei*, has been gradually lost, the spiritual idea of a 'homeland' is still alive. In fact, nationalism and national identity are reproduced in the mission and the 'migration schools' for Karen migrant children. Although the Karen churches have an independent, theological agenda, and their own programs of biblical education and extensive mission, Karen Protestant Christianity provides a crucial vehicle for political mobilisation (Keyes, 1979).

In the following, I theorise moving borders in a new way. The border has moved as

2 In this paper, I draw on ongoing fieldwork on religious spaces and self-identification of Karen migrants across the Thailand-Burma border. Ethnographic research and survey research on Christian, Theravada Buddhist, and Animist movements was done in north-western Thailand and in eastern Burma. Co-researchers in a research project funded generously by the Thailand Research Fund include Kwanchewan Buadaeng and Samak Kosem, Department of Anthropology, Chiang Mai University, Thailand. The first draft was presented in Marseille, France, for the International Burma Studies Conference, 6-9 July 2010.

3 For an exciting perspective on Buddhist spaces and networks in Karen state, see Hayami (in press).

the control of the territory and the border itself has shifted between Thai or Burmese authorities and the Karen, a people that lives in both Thailand and Burma. I contend that religious networks and social support structures, civil society, church networks, and Christian Protestant communities as well as evangelist and missionary ministries create corridors, passages, and spaces of reconstruction in the third space of the liminal, extreme niche in the Thai borderland (Horstmann & Wadley, 2009; South, 2010). Different factions within the KNU, DKBA, and Burmese army fight and compete fiercely over the control of territory and business licences, and religious spaces support consistent efforts of competing warlords to control areas and people. Christian missionary work therefore competes with Buddhist pagoda-planting and Buddhist charismatic authority.

The refugee camp, largely controlled by the indigenous KNU refugee committee and upheld by humanitarian aid, becomes a centre of proselytisation and reproduction of Karen nationalism (Dudley, 2007; Gravers, 2007; Horstmann, 2011). Thus, displaced Karen become part of globalising political and spiritual projects as national and Protestant Christian members of a global Karen *community*. After reconstruction in the Thai borderland, these politicised humanitarian projects re-enter the conflict zone inside eastern Burma to support the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), to support the churches or in the form of humanitarian, yet nationalistic organisations, to support the internally displaced Karen in the Karen state and to provide spiritual worship and emergency aid to them.

Christian spirituality, militarism, and nationalism go hand in hand to fuel the Karen cause, the ideology of reconstruction in the Thai borderland, and the narrative of spiritual warfare. Refugees do not only cross a political boundary but also a religious one. The literate, elite, and intellectual circles of the Baptist Karen become realigned and reordered in political exile. The holy bible and the missionary Karen script provide the basis for Christian interpretation of the national narrative and the transformation of the physical space of Karen land into a transcendent notion of a Karen land. This perspective of a Christian nation conceals the internal diversity of the Karen in Burma, where religious affiliations vary according to region and village (e.g. Gravers, 2007).

Christians make up no more than one third of the Karen population while the majority of the Pwo Karen is ancestral Buddhist. However, the Christian Skaw Karen

are mostly in an economically better situation and better educated than the Buddhist Pwo. From the Karen point of view, Christianity is not seen as a non-Karen tradition but as a new ritual practice or a new worship. Neither is it looked at as a change in tradition or custom. "Christianity and Buddhism have been converted into genuine Karen traditions, replacing former rituals and prayers" (Gravers, 2007, p. 232). The literate nationalist circles emerging in the nineteenth century, described skilfully by Womack (2005), have realigned and are extended to political exile, resettled Karen diaspora in the West and to the internet. Reading the Bible through Karen eyes also means reading the past anew and planning for the future.

In this article, I discuss the role of Baptist networks in the politics of reconstruction in a contested borderland in the context of forced migration. Displaced Karen who cross the border depend on religious networks as social support structures and are politically mobilised by these. I argue that the emerging religious and national narrative cannot be separated from the context of civil war that has plagued the Karen since the escalation of the armed insurgency. It is the thesis of this paper that the emergence of a militarised Karen National Union in the context of the insurgency has consolidated a particular ethno-political national narrative associated with distinctive territorial claims. The KNU claims that the Burmese regime is committing 'genocide' against them and that the Karen have to defend and protect themselves. In this context, I am interested how missionary and evangelical networks respond to the humanitarian crisis in eastern Burma. Not only have their evangelising missions met the refugees when they are in their most vulnerable position, they also mobilise inside the conflict zone across the border and proselytise on the Thai border. Thus, I see missionary efforts on the Thai border as a continuation of earlier efforts of Karen Protestant and Catholic proselytisation in Burma.

Contested Sovereignties Across the Thailand-Burma Border

In Burma, some ethnic minorities (Shan, Mon, Karenni, Kachin, and Chin) in the borderlands have developed their own nationalities and ethnic militia (Gravers, 2007). The Burmese state on the other hand has established a *regime* of differential citizenship in which some people are granted citizenship rights while these are denied to others. The Burmese army has also waged a protracted and brutal war against the

ethnic nationalities' armies at the frontiers (South, 2008). It is important to note here that it is the civil population that has to bear the casualties and terrible consequences of the war. The effects of the war are difficult to bear: They include systematic terror, burning of villages and rice barns, campaigns of relocation, arbitrary arrest and intimidation, summary executions, forced labour, sexual abuse, and rape (Grundy-Warr & Wong, 2002; Smith, 2007).⁴ Thousands of people are forced to leave the villages as a result of these severe human rights violations, find themselves in the jungle, on the mountains, roaming around without food and medical attention, and struggle to make their way to the Thai-Burmese border. Hundreds of thousands of people are internally displaced, inhabiting the Burma-Karen frontier region without much hope to return home. The suffering, wounding, casualties, and trauma are immense.⁵

While NGOs and humanitarian agencies in Thailand and in the West report these human rights violations extensively, little is known about the violations on the part of the KNU. The villagers now find themselves intimidated and pressured from several sides and are threatened not only by Burmese soldiers but also by the DKBA and KNLA which demand food, protection, and even soldiers. The protracted conflict also has its own dynamic and there is a number of warlords and war entrepreneurs who compete for business licenses and resource extraction and who do not care much about what side they are fighting for. The KNU regards itself as an army of angels and as a democratic institution, yet individual human rights abuses and extortion also occur on the side of the KNLA brigades.

In the war zone of eastern Burma, Burmese citizenship has probably lost much of its practical value as social welfare and educational infrastructure collapse. While in the past the KNU-controlled territory used to function as a convenient buffer zone between Thailand and Burma, with the KNU being a conservative anti-communist force under the leadership of Bo Mya, nowadays the KNU has become a burden in the diplomatic re-approachment between Thailand and Burma. Today, the borderlands are highly contested, while the Burmese army is constantly building new alliances with break-away factions of the ethnic nationalities factions and is trying to instrumentalise these by transforming them into regular border guard forces (South, 2008).

Rajah (1990) pointed out that the Karen rebel movement is highly unusual in that

4 See the very informative current reports of Human Rights Watch, Karen Human Rights Group, or Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC).

5 See the very insightful report by TBBC (2011) on displacement and poverty.

it is a largely Christian movement in a largely Buddhist environment. Visitors who work with the Karen are welcome, as the Karen hope that foreigners will publicise their 'cause'. This has led to a lack of detachment on the part of travellers, activists, and scholars who have identified with the goals of the Karen. This identification has led to biased reports on the conflict, as Western scholarship, with notable exceptions (South, 2011), sympathised with the KNU that they saw as a democratic organisation with humanitarian goals (Rogers, 2004). The documentation of human rights violations committed by the Burmese army against the non-combatant civil population in the 1990s led to the rise of humanitarian assistance along the Thai border and to the identification of humanitarian aid workers with the KNU. Consequently, critical studies on the everyday life of the refugees, the Karen insurgency movement, and the political administration of the refugee camps are still rare.⁶

This paper presents an attempt to contribute to this field. Humanitarian organisations did not only identify the indigenous refugee committee as their natural partner but also depended on it for the implementation of welfare projects. The KNU was able to manipulate humanitarian aid and to channel the resources into nationalist and Christian education. In this way, the aid industry building up at the Thailand-Burma border provided crucial support and positive media coverage for the KNU that controlled and recruited from the camps, and benefitted from taxes (donations) and supplies from the Thailand Burma Border Council (TBBC). Later, the KNU also benefitted from the remittances from the resettled Karen communities in the West. Many humanitarian aid organisations uncritically supported the KNU during the civil war and thus kept the military machine of the KNU alive (South, 2011). Saying this, I do not position myself for or against the KNU or the Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Convention or the Thai Karen Baptist Convention but simply contribute to revealing the facts that have been kept silent in the numerous reports of Karen Human Rights organisations and the KNU.⁷

⁶ For a similar case of a lack of critical studies on the Shan see Jirattikorn (2011).

⁷ There is a slight danger of essentialising Karen refugees in the academic exercise of demystifying and deconstructing Karen national or Karen Christian Protestant identity (Malkki, 1992; 1996).

Protestant Christianity and Karen Nationalism

In most analyses, religion has not been part of the picture, although it provides a privileged lens to study the identity processes of refugees. Religion and religious networks critically relate to mobility on the Thai-Burmese frontier. Most of all, missionary networks and humanitarian activism are characterised by movement. Missionaries cross the border against all odds: While Kawthoolei was widely accessible, the Back Pack Health Workers and the missionary Free Burma Rangers (FBR) today, for instance, take considerable risks by entering the conflict zone to provide emergency relief. Movement across the border can thus be interpreted as a religious commitment. The interconnections of missionary work, humanitarian crisis, and forced migration also allow a fresh angle on the movement in the borderland. Where humanitarian organisations cannot enter the conflict zone in eastern Burma, Christian Protestant networks fill the gap.

As many of the ethnic minorities have become partly Christianised, the identity marker of religion becomes key in the conflict as the Baptist and Catholic churches operate in a nation state environment where Buddhism is not a state religion but the predominant one, and where popular Karen Buddhist movements vie with Karen Christian networks for hegemony in the villages. In present Burma, the issue of religion is much politicised as Christianity is regarded with suspicion by the Burmese state authorities. In Thailand, by contrast, the Christian church of Thailand is fully recognised by the Thai government and benefits from religious freedom. This political tolerance has motivated the presence of multiple Christian missionary agencies in northern Thailand, from where they operate in the politically much more sensitive environments of the neighbouring countries. Baptist and Seven Day Adventist networks are not the only missionary networks in humanitarian aid and relief welfare, the Catholic Church is very well established through the presence of churches, schools, and Catholic centres. In addition, Pentecostal churches and evangelical networks, from the US, South Korea, and Taiwan, now have established a presence in northern Thailand as well and have begun to work with the poorest segments of the population, hill tribe minorities, drug addicts, and refugees. They have used the same community churches or established their own churches and have especially attracted young and underprivileged people to their worship services and summer camps.

Historically speaking, American Baptist missionaries played a central role in the development of Karen national imagination (Keyes, 1979). Catholic missionaries and Catholic relief welfare organisations by contrast are not tied to the KNU and the insurgency in the way that Baptist pastors were and are. The largely Christian Karen rebel movement used to control large tracts of territory in eastern Burma, operating from bases in north-western Thailand. This situation changed dramatically in the 1990s when the deterioration of the military situation and the large inflow of refugees, Karen civil population, and Burmese students required a change in strategy. The control of the refugees by the Thai government was heightened and refugees are not allowed to leave the refugee camp, although leaders of the committees go in and out.⁸ In the documentation of the Karen, there is a bias on Christianity, although the Christians – in several denominations – are in the minority. In access to humanitarian assistance and resettlement to third countries, notably the US, Christians are privileged against non-Christians. Clearly, the ethnic cleansing of the Karen population in eastern Burma was instrumentalised to further the interests of the Karen rebel movement. Yet, it is the armed rebellion that caused the retribution by the *Tatmadaw*, the Burmese army, on the civil population that endures incredible suffering.

Moreover, the competition of Christianity and Buddhism has become a key issue. The largely Christian KNU is not only in fight with the Burmese army, but also with the Buddhist Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) that has allied with the Tatmadaw. The retreat of the KNU from its bases in eastern Burma resulted in the DKBA's control of the border. The ongoing factionalism within the Karen rebel movement and the withdrawal and growing dependence of the KNU on Thailand has resulted in further fragmentation. International NGOs and a sophisticated network of religious and non-religious organisations and groups provide the social welfare wing of the insurgency movement (Horstmann, 2011; South, 2011).

At the same time, the camp provides a site for mobilisation of young soldiers for the 'revolution' of the Karen. This is why the camps have become dangerous sanctuaries: In various instances, Burmese military and DKBA soldiers stormed the camps, shelling them and burning houses, and searching for KNLA soldiers. Karen nationalism and Christianity are intimately intertwined, reinforcing each other.

⁸ The best introduction on the history of the camps remains Lang (2002). See also the recent booklet by the TBBC (2011).

Many scholars suggested that evangelical Protestantism is an attractive religious option for many marginal ethnic groups. For Karen displaced people from Burma, this is not entirely convincing as a substantial proportion of the Karen in Burma maintain their local spirit beliefs. But the Baptist minority assumes a hegemonic position in the Thai-Burmese borderland because of the organisational, financial, and communicative strength of protestant churches and the many Karen non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that are operated by Christians. This becomes particularly evident in the refugee camps where the Christian missionary networks dominate religious life. The KNU and the KNLA recruit soldiers and supporters from the camps.

While the Baptist church in Burma is not directly associated with the Karen National Union, most of the leadership of the KNU is Christian and many pastors preach directly for the KNU. In the words of their leaders, the Baptist church provides the spiritual umbrella for the ethnic nationalist movement. Furthermore, in the refugee camps administered by the KNU and by the Thai army, the Karen refugee committee is made up of KNU-pastors. When the refugee camps were established in 1984, the Karen refugee committee emerged as a natural partner for the evangelical missionary networks that were directly involved in providing emergency welfare and assistance to the Karen people crossing the border. Moreover, the first refugee camps emerged from the villages of the KNU families. While the population of the camp has become more diverse, the Karen make up the large majority, and churches as well as the Bible school are central institutions of cultural life in the camp.

While many ecumenical Christian and non-religious international NGOs have since joined the consortium, religious networks play a very important role in assisting the displaced people by providing them with food, clothes, and shelter. The KNU has thus established a network in which it is associated with many civil associations and NGOs. But while national identities – Burmese/Thai – do not fit the context in the borderland, where people are neither Burmese nor Thai, the Karen stick to the idea of a Karen homeland and a Karen nation. This is a case of the construction of Karen intellectual circles and publics and the imagination of Karen state spaces. These circles and the public focus on senior church leaders, represented by the theological seminaries on the Thai border and in Burma. The idea of a Karen nation governed by the KNU is now reproduced in and extended to the diaspora. Old Karen war veterans go to church with traditional clothes and full national and KNU regalia. Before the

fall of the garrison of Mannerplaw in 1995, the KNU controlled vast territorial tracts in eastern Burma and thus constituted a quasi state and buffer state. The gate read 'Welcome to Kawthoolei' and the KNU comprised its own army, its own schools and hospitals, as well as its own townships, bureaucracy, and flag (Rajah, 1990). The KNU raised substantial resources by taxing the Karen population and the illicit border market and by exploiting the teak forests. After the military defeat of the KNLA and the resettlement of Christian Karen families to the USA, Australia, and Europe, the religious reconstruction of a Karen imagined community gained importance. The KNU, individual families, and churches gained new income through remittances following this new diaspora. Religious interpretation of the Bible was used to justify a war that is perceived to be 'just'. Metaphors of refugees being 'saved on Noah's ark', 'God's mysterious plan', as well as the promise of the 'promised land' and 'eternal life' were extensively used by Christian leaders to encourage each other. The portrayed heroic behaviour of the KNU was underlined by delivering emergency health services and prayer worshipping to the internally displaced persons in the war zone. In a sense, the imagination of a Christian nation is mentally transported to the refugee camp. Evangelical Christianity can thus be seen as a replacement of the dwindling homeland in south-eastern Burma.

Evangelisation and Proselytisation

Facing massive persecution and violence, and given their loss of citizenship, the Karen from eastern Burma are marginal to Thai modernity. In this situation, the humanitarian aid organisations emerge as crucial allies for the KNU's reorganisation in the camps and contribute to the making of 'ethno-fiction' by the Karen themselves, international humanitarian organisations, and academic scholarship (Rajah, 1990). Far from being passive victims, evangelical Karen become important agents of proselytising, who use their cultural capital to reach out to their relatives, friends, and to the community of Christians. The Karen church not only provides a large selection of services, welfare, and relief; in addition, Christians are able to re-enter the humanitarian space as soldiers-medics-missionaries in a war zone largely inaccessible for international humanitarian NGOs. Fuelled by global alliances with American Christian churches, South Korean Pentecostals, and international advocacy networks, this

project of evangelisation and reconstruction is still in the hands of the educated Christian leadership. I also do not replace ethnic labels with new ones, but look at how identities are constructed in religious and nationalist movements, and contested in 'economies of power' that constitute the 'field'. By forging the ethno-fiction of a united Karen nation, the KNU conceals vast internal differences within the Karen population. I argue that the invention of a united Karen leadership is a very recent one and that this leadership was imposed on an extremely diverse population.

While the Baptists constitute a very eloquent minority within the Karen population, the Buddhists are in the majority. In the Karen state, the ethnic and religious composition can vary from village to village. In the KNU, the leadership is mostly made up of Christians, while the foot soldiers are for the great majority Buddhists. The frustration of being locked up in the lower level of the KNU's hierarchy was effectively used by the Buddhist monk U Thuzana who instrumentalised the status gap by mobilising these grievances to found his own breakaway army, the DKBA (Gravers, 2007).

Religious developments in the Karen state have always been very dynamic and conversion to Christianity was never a straightforward, uniform movement, but was instead characterised by ups and downs and may have encapsulated some villages and regions but not others. Many Karen villages remain animist and follow autochthonous Karen traditions, while indigenous millenarian Buddhist movements developed in parts of the Karen state. In some areas, there was intensive religious competition and that dynamic remains until today. In a landmark study, William Womack showed that this competition of social networks and intellectual circles centred on the development and appropriation of the Karen script and on the contested imaginations of a Karen ethnicity (Womack, 2005). By examining Christian, Buddhist, and syncretised literary groups in the nineteenth and twentieth century in different regions of eastern Burma, Womack shows that the missionary Karen Sgaw script was only one among 11 different scripts, albeit the most influential one. Competing scripts were reproduced in the churches, monasteries, and among syncretic groups such as the Lekke and Telekhon, mixing Buddhist, Christian, and autochthonous elements. The nationalist Christian leadership of the KNU is, according to Martin Smith, only a recent phenomenon (Smith, 1991; 2007). However, this does not make the link between Christianity and the insurgency less important. Religion provides a very

interesting lens to look at the contestation of Karen representation and territorial spaces in the borderland. But Womack's work makes the perspective of Karen nationalism more diverse and cautions us not to make the mistake of producing a unitary perspective where there is none. South (2007) points out that many syncretic Karen in Burma identify neither with the KNU nor with the DKBA but are drawn into a vicious cycle of violence. Womack is certainly right to state that the nationalist narrative is filtered to foreign researchers by the KNU, the Karen refugee committee and Karen NGOs.

While this diversity remains in Burma, I argue that the Baptist Christian network has the strongest lobby in the refugee camps and that the domination of the administration of the camps is reflected in the Christian teaching in the camp schools. Of course, Christianity is not a unified entity either. From the beginning, American Baptist missionaries proselytised along Catholic missionaries, and the Christian landscape of today is characterised by the co-existence of Baptist, Anglican, Seven Day Adventist, and Catholic community churches. In addition, other denominations compete with the dominant Baptist stream, the Seven Day Adventist church being second place. I claim that the privileged position of the evangelic Baptist church and its close association to the KNU in the refugee camp results in a campaign to missionise refugees, and that this is what happens. Refugees, Buddhist and animist, who are socialised in the migrant schools and in the humanitarian networks are exposed to and often convert to Christianity. The reasons for conversion are complex, though, the main reason is that individual refugees want to be part of the collective body of the Karen characterised by faith and nationalism. Christianity symbolises modernity and cosmopolitanism. Not least, conversion to Christianity grants access to social welfare and better access to humanitarian aid and social mobility. Inside the Karen state, the DKBA also offers a perspective and the KNU and DKBA now aggressively compete over the symbols of nationalism. In both guerrilla armies, religious affiliation has become a key symbol and the DKBA is involved in building pagodas and temples while the Baptist network is eager to plant churches. The Karen are not just recipients of humanitarian aid. Unlike former Vietnamese refugees who converted to Christianity, the Christian Karen are old Christians who have a tradition of proselytising among their own ethnic group and other ethnic minorities. Christian missionary networks are not the only religious networks in town. The cultural hegemony of the Karen

in the Thai borderland in north-western Thailand excludes the subaltern Buddhist, Islamic, and autochthonous Karen communities that construct their own religious landscapes in Thailand and in Burma.

State of the Field

My research on the transnational religious lives of the Christians adds to and complements important research on the economic, political, and cultural practices of transnational refugees. Brees (2010) in particular provides very valuable research about the remittance strategies of refugees and the practical difficulties they face. Another important contribution comes from Sandra Dudley whose work on the exiled Karenni in the Thailand/Burma borderland focuses on the transformation of Karenni refugees into modern, educated subjects, Karenni identification, and the rise of a Karenni nationalism (Dudley, 2007, pp. 77-106). The Karenni (red Karen) identity is born in the refugee camp and, similar to Karen identity, conceals internal diversity, contradictions, tensions, and plurality in favour of a united, Christian dominated Karenni-ness. In a recent full monograph on the Karenni refugees in Thailand, Dudley uses a material culture lens to analyse the formations of pre- and post-exile Karenni identity (Dudley, 2010). This article can thus be read in convergence with Dudley's important work. The work of Michael Gravers who focuses on the messianic and Buddhist traditions of the Karen has been decisive for my thinking on sacred spaces of the Karen. This paper thus complements Gravers' path-breaking on-going work on indigenous Buddhist millenarian movements (Gravers, 2007; 2011).

Theoretical Considerations

Castells (1996) argues that the world is reconstituting itself around a series of networks strung around the globe based on advanced communication technologies. He claims that the network is the signature of new society. Networks are driven by modern communication technologies and reorganise geographical space by creating a new material foundation of time-sharing. Networks are social ties that allocate and control resources. They are not simply amalgams of nodes and ties, but are always organised around projects, goals, and values. Each network constitutes its own social

world, and it is the bundle of material and immaterial resources and flexible, yet, coordinated communication, which makes action possible. Clearly, I want to argue that religious networks very much spread through the network logic. In the Thailand/Burma borderland, the Karen Baptist Convention is a network that is organised around the political project of spreading Karen nationalism and Protestant Christianity that is based on a set of material and immaterial religious resources, and that is bound together by use of advanced electronic communication on a local and a global scale. The question of inclusion and exclusion is one of the most fundamental in network society. As Castells writes, the network also acts as a gatekeeper. Inside networks, opportunities are created while outside of them survival is increasingly difficult (Castells, 2000, p. 187). Indeed, for many people outside the existing Karen structures, survival becomes a daily struggle collecting garbage, working in factories, or as labourers under the minimum wage, while Christian networks provide shelter, food, and security in a hostile environment.

The concept of a transnational social formation gives a more coherent frame for explaining the dynamics of durable transnational exchanges. A concise overview of transnational social formations is provided by Stephen Vertovec (1999; 2009). In arguing that the Christian Karen community provides a case study for the transnationalisation of the social world, I follow Vertovec's definition of transnational social formations and his proposition for empirical research on transnationalism. The Christian Protestant community is a transnational social formation with a special type of consciousness and national identity of an exiled but 'chosen' people that extends to the Thai borderland and to the Karen diaspora in the West.

The project of the Karen community is kept alive through remittances from transnational humanitarian organisation and church networks and from the growing diaspora. Transnationalism is an arena for transnational advocacy networks, NGOs, websites, and ethno-political formations in the diaspora. The transnational social formation has a durable spatial location in the Karen state, in refugee camps, in the countryside of the Thai borderland, in the migration schools, in the border town of Mae Sot, and in the Karen communities in the USA, Scandinavia, and Australia. The consciousness of a Christian Karen identity in a durable transnational space makes the exiled Karen diaspora a transnational social formation par excellence. This transnational formation takes up the social figuration of an ethnic and religious commu-

nity. The refugee camps, the orphanages and migrant schools are important spaces of proselytisation. The organisation of the refugees in missionary networks often, but not always, collides with the interests of the national order and contributes to what Salemin (2009) calls the 'cosmopolitisation' of the refugees. Cosmopolitisation here means a greater awareness of the world and participation in the public sphere, but does not necessarily translate in de-ethnicisation. While the state puts severe constraints on the movement of the refugees in the borderland by confining them to this area, Christian missionaries present themselves as saviours as they provide crucial access to humanitarian aid, social services, transnational networks and global ideologies that are closely associated with modernity and education. Unlike many other forgotten ethnic minority groups, the Karen have succeeded in reaching substantial public awareness and solidarity in the West.

The Re-Entry of Christian Refugees Into Burma

Christian refugees in north-western Thailand establish strategies to make a living, assist friends and relatives in Thailand and Burma and decrease their vulnerability in Thailand, depending on faith-based organisations. Family-splitting strategies are among the means to spread opportunities and incomes. It is very important to realise that all the different spaces in which the refugees make a living are closely intertwined and that the church provides an institutional umbrella for activities of the diaspora in Thailand. For many Christian refugees, it is not enough to care for their own survival, but the educated Karen activists use their institutional resources in Thailand to re-enter Burmese territory and to actively support displaced people in the Karen state. Diaspora groups, Karen human rights organisations and middle-class activists collect a mass of information on human rights violations and supply international organisations and NGOs in Europe and in the USA with these information. These international groups channel resources to the activists on the ground coordinating education and health services to displaced people. One example is the Karen Teacher Working Group, which comprises volunteers from the communities who had to walk three weeks in the jungle to transport school materials and medicine to schools in war-torn eastern Burma. The Karen Baptist Convention also uses institutional resources to assist the refugees at the border and displaced people in

Burmese territory. Thus, pastors and evangelists who have an intimate knowledge of the area re-enter Burma by foot to distribute the Bible, spread the word, and to assist in church services. The Back Pack Health Workers literally walk into Burma and provide emergency relief, in addition to many other secular and faith-based initiatives and grassroots efforts. The Karenni Social and Welfare Centre collaborates with the TBBC and the Burma Relief Centre to provide emergency relief and training and to document human rights abuses. Another prominent example is the Free Burma Rangers. The FBR was founded by a former US army special envoy who started the operation to provide emergency relief to displaced people in war zones. FBR is a non-armed humanitarian group that prepares nurses to walk into war zones protected by the KNLA or ethnic armies. The volunteers undergo intensive health care training and are able to immediately help people who suffer from illness, starvation and violence. Video cameras and voice recorders are used to document human rights abuses. In the USA, FBR runs a campaign to collect donations and Christmas presents for displaced people in Burma. The FBR is a missionary agent that makes no secret that it operates based on the Bible, but emergency work has been extended to the non-Christian population. In the war zones, the FBR organises a 'Good Life Club' in which the volunteers entertain the children and try to encourage them. The FBR also prays together with the displaced people and provides church service for them. International prayer requests and prayer sessions are organised for Burma. The images that the FBR disseminates in cyberspace provide material for a powerful narrative of the Christian community on the suffering of the Karen and play a central role in mobilising advocacy networks and donations for the work of Karen groups.

Concluding Remarks

In describing the agency of Karen refugee leaders in the Thai-Burmese borderland, I used a concept of borderlands as active spaces that spoke of interconnections as much as of geopolitical boundedness. Rather than seeing borders as fixed zones, it is more productive to see the border as constantly built up and contested through the actions of local agents (Horstmann & Wadley, 2006). In the nightmarish experience of the civil war, the Christian landscape at the Thai-Burmese border uses education as a crucial resource to socialise Karen refugees. Efforts of spreading the gospel in the Thai

borderland and in the growing diaspora are directly following earlier efforts of Christianisation in Burma from which the Karen emerged as keen evangelists who brought the word to other ethnic minorities. The cognitive model and map of Kawthoolei was imposed on the Karen and ignores their internal diversity. In the refugee camp, it is the image of the common 'enemy' and the narrative of suffering that have been exhausted by the Karen. In a hostile environment, and harassed by the state, unable to return home to Burma, the Baptist church provides a key location for mobilising the resources for a better life, solidarity with other refugees and a vision. Far from being passive recipients of humanitarian aid, refugees make careers in the church and emphasise their aspirations by actively participating in evangelical efforts. While the future of Kawthoolei remains locked, Christian Baptist missionaries see new opportunities for spreading the faith. Religious networks have established a presence and remain active on both sides of the border and organise many of the people who become internally displaced, migrants, and refugees. In that sense, the border has indeed moved much closer to the sanctuaries in Thailand and has made returning to Burma ever more difficult for KNU-related activists. The vision of Kawthoolei is an imaginary construction of territorialisation and I argue re-tribalisation in which the suffering and the humanitarian aid provide necessary tools for the reinvention of the Karen as chosen people who make references to a shared history and a shared memory to justify their claims to a country of their own.

References

- Brees, I. (2010). Refugees and Transnationalism on the Thai-Burmese Border. *Global Networks*, 10(2), 282-299.
- Castells, M. (2000). *The Rise of the Network Society* (2nd ed. Vol. 1: The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture). Oxford, England & Cambridge, England: Blackwell.
- Dudley, S. (2007). Reshaping Karenni-ness in exile: Education, Nationalism, and being in the wider world. In M. Gravers (Ed.), *Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma* (pp. 77-106). Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press.
- Gravers, M. (2001). Cosmology, Prophets, and Rebellion among the Buddhist Karen in Burma and Thailand. *MOUSSONS*, 4, 3-31.
- Gravers, M. (2007). Conversion and Identity: Religion and the Formation of Karen Ethnic Identity in Burma. In M. Gravers (Ed.), *Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma* (pp. 227-258). Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press.

- Grundy-Warr, C., & Wong, E. (2002). Geographies of Displacement: The Karenni and the Shan across the Myanmar-Thailand border. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 23(1), 93-122.
- Hayami, Y. (in press). Pagodas and Prophets: Contesting Sacred Space and Power among Buddhist Karen in Karen State. *Journal of Asian Studies*.
- Hefner, R. W. (1993). *Conversion to Christianity. Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Horstmann, A., & Wadley R. L. (Eds.). (2009). *Centering the Margin: Agency and Narrative in Southeast Asian Borderlands*. Oxford, England & New York, NY: Berghahn
- Horstmann, A. (2011). Ethical Dilemmas and Interactions of Faith-Based Humanitarian Organizations in the Myanmar-Thailand Borderland: The Example of the Karen Refugee Crisis. *Journal of Refugee Studies (Special Issue on Faith-Based Humanitarianism in Contexts of Forced Displacement)*, 24(3), 1-20.
- Jirattikorn, A. (2011). Shan Virtual Insurgency and the spectatorship of the nation. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 42(1), 17-38.
- Keyes, C. F. (1979). *Ethnic Adaptation and Identity. The Karen on the Thai Frontier with Burma*. Philadelphia, PA: ISHI Science Center.
- Lang, H. L. (2002). *Fear and Sanctuary. Burmese Refugees in Thailand*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Malkki, L. (1992). National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees. *Cultural Anthropology*, 7(1), 24-44.
- Malkki, L. (1996). Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization, *Cultural Anthropology*, 11(3), 377-404.
- Rajah, A. (1990). Ethnicity, Nationalism and the Nation-State. The Karen in Burma and Thailand. In G. Wijeyewardene (Ed.), *Ethnic Groups across National Boundaries in Mainland Southeast Asia* (pp. 102-133). Singapore: ISEAS.
- Rozenberg, G. (2010). *Renunciation and Power: the quest for sainthood in contemporary Burma*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies Press.
- Smith, M. (1991). *Burma. Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*. London, England & New York, NY: Zed Press.
- Smith, M. (2007). *State of Strife. The Dynamics of Ethnic Conflict in Burma* (Policy Studies Institute No. 36 Southeast Asia). Washington, DC: East-West Centre.
- South, A. (2008). *Ethnic Politics in Burma. States of Conflict*. London, England & New York, NY: Routledge.
- South, A. (2011). *Burma's longest war. Anatomy of the Karen conflict*. Amsterdam, the Netherlands: Transnational Institute/Burma Centre Netherlands.
- Stern, T. (1968). Ariya and the Golden Book: A Millenarian Buddhist Sect among the Karen. *Journal of Asian Studies*, 27(2), 297-328.
- Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC). (2011). *Displacement and Poverty in Southeast Burma/Myanmar*. Chiang Mai, Thailand: TBBC Press.

Vertovec, S. (1999). Conceiving and researching transnationalism. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 22(2), 447-462.

Vertovec, S. (2009). *Transnationalism (Key Ideas)*. London, England & New York, NY: Routledge.

Womack, W. (2005). *Literate Networks and the Production of Sgaw and Pwo Karen Writing in Burma, ca. 1830-1930*. Unpublished PhD dissertation, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, England.